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# THE JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLK-LORE.

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## FOLK-LORE OF THE NORTH CAROLINA MOUNTAINEERS.<sup>1</sup>

FOLK-LORE has been defined as the traditional knowledge, beliefs, superstitions, customs, and legends of the common people.

Because of the recent and rapid settlement and development of the United States by a mixed immigration, and because of the constant moving to and fro of its population, only a few sections of our country have a distinctive folk-lore. It is true we frequently find certain characteristics marking individuals of certain sections, and there are perhaps in every section families who have inherited traditions, but these are not sufficiently general and strong in their influence to be called folk-lore.

The conditions which have prevailed in the Southern Appalachian mountains for so many generations have come nearer producing, or perhaps I should say preserving, a folk-lore than those of any other section of our country. Immigrants from the middle classes of England and Scotland, or the descendants of such immigrants, were the first settlers, which made the people homogeneous; cut off by natural barriers from the great currents of trade and travel, isolated by rough roads and the difficulties of distant travel, these people were little influenced by the outside world or by books, and they preserved and transmitted, with slight change, that mass of common knowledge and popular beliefs and customs which they inherited, and which we speak of as folk-lore.

While I am convinced there is a oneness about the mountaineers of the Southern Appalachians, I have confined my efforts to our own State, and have collected some of the folk-lore of the North Carolina mountaineers. The difficulties have been numerous. So far as I can learn, nothing — not even a magazine article — has been written on the subject; the nearest approach is a short collection of the folk-customs and beliefs of Lincoln County made by Miss A. C. Hoke<sup>2</sup> some years ago for the *Journal of American Folk-Lore*. As the settlers of Lincoln

<sup>1</sup> A paper read before the Pen and Plate Club, Ashville, N. C., 1906.

<sup>2</sup> "Folk-Custom and Folk-Belief in North Carolina," vol. v (1892), pp. 113-120. See, also, James Mooney's article on "Folk-Lore of the Carolina Mountains," vol. ii (1889), 95-104.

County were mostly Germans, this collection has been of little service to me. It is a little surprising, however, to find that nearly all the games described by Miss Hoke as having been played by the children of these German immigrants are old English games, and are played to-day by the children of our mountaineers.

I have been unable to devote as much time as I had wished to trips into the mountains that I might the better get that direct knowledge which comes from personal contact and observation, and I have been compelled to rely on the reports made to me by friends living in various sections of our mountains. By comparing and checking these various reports I have endeavored to eliminate all that was purely local.

I wish at this point to have it clearly understood, once and for all, that this paper was not undertaken in any spirit of condescension or ridicule; it has a higher purpose. It is no disgrace to these people, isolated as they have been, that they have preserved the traditions and beliefs of their Anglo-Saxon ancestors of two hundred years ago. These things are the "proofs patent" of their good descent, the "markings" of the purest strain of Anglo-Saxon blood and character to be found in America to-day. A study of their folk-lore is specially interesting, as it gives us a glimpse of our ancestors — indeed, these mountaineers have been aptly called "our contemporary ancestors."

Solomon in his wisdom has said: "He that observeth the wind shall not sow, and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap;" and yet there are intelligent people living three thousand years later than the Wise King who will not plant certain seed except on certain days and in certain phases of the moon. For instance, Good Friday is considered the best day in the year to begin the garden, and especially should beans and all other vegetables which bear pendent fruit be planted on that day; some say, however, they may be planted on any Friday; this is supposed by some to be due to Friday's having been "hangman's day." The garden is the only thing, however, which should be commenced on a Friday, for any one who is so foolhardy as to begin anything else on that day will certainly meet with bad luck, and in the opinion of many will never live to complete the undertaking.

The moon seems to exert a powerful influence on many agricultural and domestic affairs. All plants which produce fruit above ground must be planted in the light of the moon, not necessarily in a new moon; and all plants which produce fruit underground, potatoes and such, must be planted in the dark of the moon. Also the hogs must be killed in the dark of the moon, or the bacon and lard will shrink. Rails must be split and shingles and boards gotten in the dark of the moon to keep them from warping and splitting — and the boards or shingles must be put on when the horns of the new moon point down to keep them from cupping. Plant corn when the horns of the new moon point down and the

ears will be heavy and grow low on the stalk; and sow wheat before the full moon in October. To prevent rotting, the worm fence should be laid in the light of the moon. To effectually kill the stumps, roots, and sprouts of trees, bushes, briars, etc., on land which is being cleared, they should be cut during the dark moon in August. Timber will last much longer if cut in the dark of the moon.

If the housewife would have her soap white and hard, she must make it in the light of the moon, and while the moon is on the increase; and while boiling the soap must be stirred one way only, and if stirred with a sassafras paddle it will have a pleasant odor and the maker will have good luck. If she would have her dyes well "set" so the colors will not "run," she must dye dark colors in the dark of the moon and *vice versa*.

The weather can be forecast by the moon. There will be as many snows during the winter as the moon is days old when the first snow comes. A new moon with horns pointing up indicates dry weather during that moon, if the horns tilt so as to spill the water it will be rainy. A common weather proverb runs: —

Circle around the sun,  
Will rain none,  
Circle around the moon,  
Will rain soon.

There are many signs and things besides the moon by which the weather may be forecast, and even partially regulated. For instance, if rain is needed in the spring or early summer, kill a black snake and hang it up with its belly to the sun, and the rain will come. The prevailing rains of a season will come from the same direction as comes the first rain of that season. If it does not rain on the first day of June it is not likely to rain for fifteen days, and rain on the first dog-day means rain on each of the following forty days. If it rains while the sun is shining, the witches are dancing, and it will rain again next day.

By due attention to signs and omens, the winter weather can be foretold to a nicety: Frost will come just three months after you hear the first katydid. For each foggy day in August the winter will have a snow. It is a sure sign of coming snow to hear the fire "treading snow"—that is, making a noise similar to that made by walking on snow. A heavy "mast" means a severe winter. If the cat sits with her back to the fire, watch out for a cold snap.

I know the ground-hog theory has been viciously attacked in some quarters, but the faith has not been shaken, for everybody knows that if the ground hog sees his shadow when he emerges from his hole on February 2, he will return to stay for six weeks that he may escape the severe weather to come.

A frequently quoted paraphrase of an old sailor's saying runs thus:

Red clouds at night,  
A traveller's delight;  
Red clouds in the morning,  
A traveller's warning.

There are signs and omens affecting nearly all the agricultural and domestic affairs, and the prudent farmer and his good housewife should give due attention. If the good wife would keep the hawks from troubling her young chickens, she puts a white flint rock in the fireplace where it will keep warm. To make the guard dog stay at home and attend to his duties while she may go to help in the field or go for a neighborly visit, she cuts a bit of hair from the tip of his tail and buries it under the front door-steps. Of course she wants her young cow to become a good milker — to insure this she carefully collects the milk first taken and pours it into a running stream; and she is always careful not to allow the milk, as it is drawn from the cow, young or old, to fall on the ground, for she knows that, if that happens, the cow will "hold up" her milk, and soon go dry; the good wife is also careful not to kill a toad for fear it will cause her cow to give bloody milk. If the butter will not come she heats a horseshoe and applies it to the bottom of the churn until an imprint is burnt thereon, and sometimes she may have to put it in the churn to drive away the troublesome witches. She never burns the egg-shells, nor carries eggs into the house after dark, well knowing that if she does her hens will quit laying. The farmer is careful also not to burn the cobs from which the seed-corn is shelled, knowing that it will ruin his crop; but he is careful to bury them in a moist, swampy place, and a good crop is thus insured, regardless of seasons. Before buying a milk cow he examines carefully to see that she has small horns, small neck, slim tail, and a large "cowlick" between the thighs from udder up; these are signs of a good milker. He prefers the horse which has a Roman nose, broad forehead, and flowing mane and tail — such a horse is sensible and gentle; the dish-faced, white-eyed horse should be shunned, he is foolish and vicious.

When the family moves, fire should be taken from the old home to start that in the new; but the cat should not be taken. Ashes should never be moved from the fireplace on Fridays, if so, something will be stolen from the house before the next Friday. If a young girl or maid be allowed to clean out the spring, it will go dry.

There are many signs of special significance, such as the belief that if the right hand itches you will shake hands with a stranger; if the left, you will soon handle money; this evidently gave rise to the expression, "He has an itching palm," meaning he is fond of money. Sneezing before breakfast means visitors, one for each sneeze. If a baby is allowed to see itself in a looking-glass before it is six months old, it will die before it is a year old; and if by chance it does live, it will grow up "two-faced." If a cat sits down among a crowd of girls, the one she

looks at will marry first. When the guard dog lies down in the yard and rolls over on his back, a visitor may be expected from the direction his head points. If the nose itches, visitors may be expected; but it must not be rubbed up, for that would cause the visitors to lose their way. A measuring worm on one's clothes is a sign of approaching death, as the worm is taking measures for the shroud; the evil spell is broken, however, if the worm is knocked off before it finishes. The rolling onto the hearth of a burning log or "chunk" means company is coming, and if one spits on it and thinks of the persons desired to be seen, they will come; or any wish may be made and it will "come true." If you "cuss" or step over your pole, the fish will stop biting.

There are many signs and omens which portend good or bad luck, generally, without any special significance as to what it will be. One of the most generally believed is that it is bad luck for a hare to cross the road in front of a traveller. I find, however, that in some sections the direction of the crossing governs the luck; from right to left, bad; from left to right, good. A dog's howling is also a sign of bad luck. You remember the incident in "Ivanhoe" when Cedric and his party were returning from the tournament. I can best tell it in Scott's own words:

"As the cavalcade left the court of the monastery, an incident happened somewhat alarming to the Saxons, who, of all people of Europe, were most addicted to superstitious observance of omens, and to whose opinions can be traced most of those notions upon such subjects still to be found among our popular antiquities. . . . In the present instance the apprehension of impending evil was inspired by no less respectable a prophet than a large, lean, black dog, which, sitting upright, howled most piteously as the foremost riders left the gate. . . . 'I like not that music, father Cedric,' said Athelstane, . . . 'Nor I either, Uncle,' said Wamba, 'I greatly fear we shall have to pay the piper.' 'In my mind,' said Athelstane . . . 'we had better turn back and abide with the Abbot until the afternoon. It is unlucky to travel where your path is crossed by a monk, a hare, or a howling dog, until you have eaten your next meal.'"

These bad-luck signs are many and I shall give only a few. It brings bad luck to turn a spinning-wheel backwards; to turn a chair around on one leg; to step over a broom or a person lying down — the spell may be broken, however, by immediately stepping backwards over the broom or person; for a bird to fly into the house; to carry a hoe on the shoulder into the house; to spill salt; the spell may be broken by throwing some of the salt over the left shoulder; for a hen to crow — we all know the old couplet: —

A whistling woman and a crowing hen  
Will never come to any good end.

It also brings bad luck to kill a cat; for a screech owl or hoot owl

to make its peculiar noise near the house; to walk backward with one shoe off and one on; for the fruit trees to bloom the second time in one season; to step on or over a grave; to see the new moon first through the branches of a tree; to say "thank you" or show any gratitude when given seeds or shrubs; to have rain on the wedding day; for a marriage party to meet a funeral procession; to turn round and go back after starting on a journey — the evil spell may be broken, however, by making a cross mark on the ground and spitting in it. Making the cross mark may be a corruption of the custom of crossing one's self to ward off evil, but why spit in the cross mark? Can this be a vague reference to sprinkling with holy water?

While the good-luck signs are not so numerous, there are plenty of them to give hope and prove that life is not entirely a dodging of evil. It brings very good luck to see the new moon for the first time unobstructed over the left shoulder; to find a horseshoe in the road, some say it must have nails in it, and some that the points must be toward the finder; good luck for the right eye to itch so that you rub it; bad for the left, however. Very good luck to have snow on your wedding day; to find a spider on one's clothes; to kill the first snake you see in the spring; to have a strange cat take up with you; to keep a horseshoe tacked over the door, the points must turn up, however, or the luck will spill; to find a pin or needle with point toward you, but you must pick it up —

Find a pin and pick it up,  
All that day you'll have good luck.

I believe that remnants of old English and Scotch ballads still linger in some isolated coves, but as yet I have not discovered any of them. I am constrained to think that religion's austere disapproval of the banjo, the violin, the wicked "love songs," and all such ungodliness has practically destroyed minstrelsy, and the memory of most of the old ballads. There is a song the young folks sometimes sing as they play "steal partners," which has a genuine old English flavor — it runs thus: —

I want some more of your barley,  
I want some more of your weevilly wheat,  
To make a cake for Charlie.  
Charlie, he's a nice young man,  
Charlie, he's a dandy,  
Charlie, he's a nice young man,  
And feeds the girls on candy.

If any of you here ever played "steal partners" to the music of this jolly old song, you can easily recall the glorious good time you had — and how afterwards you thought the "lancers" tamely dignified compared to "steal partners."

Notwithstanding the ban of religion, the exuberance of youth occasionally breaks forth with the picking of the banjo and patting of the

foot, and the wicked songs delight the crowd which affects to disapprove; but most of these songs are evidently of recent origin.

One song which I have found quite popular with the banjo-picking swains begins thus:—

I would not marry an old maid,  
I'll tell you the reason why,  
Her neck's so long and stringy,  
I am afraid she'll never die.

The next stanza is supposed to be the old maid's retort to this ungallant objection:—

I would not marry a bachelor,  
I'll tell you the reason why,  
His nose is always dripping,  
And his chin is never dry.

If the singer is quick-witted and sufficiently reckless, he frequently continues with improvised stanzas giving objections to marrying the red-headed girl, the cross-eyed man, the bow-legged girl, and so on, sometimes becoming ludicrously personal.

I have found the fragment of a song which I think is of some historical interest. The whole song was, no doubt, the production of some mountaineer, who about 1848 travelled to Columbia or Charleston, and returning recounted the wonders observed on these travels; the fragment found sings the wonders of the telegraph which had just been put in use in the cities named, and runs thus:—

And they hear the news from Mexico  
About the Yankees fighting,  
With a little piece of wire  
Just greased up with lightning.

This fragment is further interesting in showing that the word "Yankee" then had no sectional meaning.

The games of children are affected less, perhaps, by change than any other part of traditional knowledge. Our mountain children are still playing the same games their ancestors played hundreds of years ago:—

Leap Frog,  
Fox and Goose,  
Base,  
Hot Jacket,  
Jump the Rope,  
Tag,  
Frog in the Middle,  
Blind Man's Buff,  
Club Fist,  
Jack in the Bush, *and*  
William-a-come-trimble-toe

are still played with all the zest of childhood, as are also such games as:



Hide the Switch,  
 Going to Jerusalem,  
 Chick-a-ma-crane-a-crow,  
 Mala-a-bight,  
 Old Sister Phœbe, *and*  
 The King's Army.

I believe we have in this last mentioned game, as it is sometimes played, an echo of the Revolutionary War. The game seems also to be the child's adaptation of the old English game of Tug-of-War. It is played thus: Two children separate from the others, and each selects a name for himself; it may be anything, but as I find it sometimes played, one child selects the name Tory and the other Whig, without letting the other children know which is which. These two leaders then face each other joining hands, while the others form in column, and as they approach the two, all sing: —

Hoist the gates as high as the sky,  
 And let King George's army pass by.

The two raise their clasped hands, and the army marches triumphantly under; all pass except the last one, upon whom the raised arms suddenly fall, unless he is so agile as to escape by ducking and dodging. If he is caught the column marches on and the captive is asked in a whisper if he is a Whig or a Tory. The column approaches the gate again, and the same formula is repeated; this is kept up until the whole army is captured, one by one, and is lined up, part behind the Whig and part behind the Tory, sometimes of course with a very unequal division. Then each little fellow clasps the one in front of him around the waist, and, at a word from the leaders, who still tightly clasp hands, every child pulls with all his might, the object being to pull down the opposing side; and when the yelling, tugging little fellows fall, what a whoop and what a scramble!

In many parts of our mountains generations have been born, grown to old age, and even died without the aid of a physician. The people have had to rely on home treatments and old women's remedies. These are mostly combinations or concoctions of the herbs, roots, and barks found in the neighborhood; one of the mountaineers said to me that he believed the Almighty put in each neighborhood a natural remedy for every sickness of that neighborhood. Some of these old remedies are:

Butterfly-root tea given hot cures pneumonia; boneset tea is also good for pneumonia.

Sourwood bark tea thickened with flour made into pills cures dropsy; another remedy for dropsy is made by steeping elder bark in vinegar in which rusty nails have been soaked.

Wild cucumber bark soaked in whiskey is good for liver trouble: bloodroot is also good for the liver.

Sampson snakeroot tea cures colic.

Lady-slipper tea is good for nervousness.

Balm of Gilead buds steeped in whiskey cure coughs.

Shop cinders and sulphur are good to renew the blood.

Dogwood bark and old field cinders are good to clear the complexion.

Pulverized wild-cherry bark taken before meals stimulates the appetite.

Tea made of sunflower seed, prickly pear, and green coffee cures gravel; spikewood root is also good for kidney troubles; and a hot greasy plate that has been used over meat or beans while cooking, placed over the region of the bladder, will remove the gravel and let the urine pass when all other remedies have failed.

Flax-seed tea cures acid in the blood.

Dried beef gall applied to a rising will bring it to a head; and a poultice made from the bark of sassafras roots will make a boil come to a head.

Smoke-dried leaves of life-everlasting cure toothache.

Seneca snakeroot tea is good for the hives, measles, and all diseases which must be "brought out;" it is also good for whooping-cough. Red poke berries are good for thrash.

Hart leaves and bark from root of red alder are good to regulate the bowels, especially of teething children; cold water drunk off sliced cumphery roots is good for diarrhœa.

Dried and powdered butterfly-root dusted on a sore will stop proud flesh forming.

Poultice of Jemson leaves is good for the sore throat.

Charcoal and salt in equal proportions is a sure cure for scurvy.

Red pepper pods applied to a felon will give relief.

The inside of a chicken gizzard dried and powdered is good for dyspepsia, and also to stop vomiting.

A bunch of cold keys put down the back will stop the nose bleeding.

Perhaps our medical friends can give us scientific reasons why these "herb remedies" are efficacious, but there are some accepted remedies which I fear would baffle their science, for instance: To cure whooping-cough, the sufferer should eat a piece of bread baked by a woman whose maiden name was the same as that of her husband; but the woman must not give it to the sufferer, she must leave it where some one can get it for him, or better still, if the sufferer himself can steal it. To remove a wart, cut it until it bleeds and put a drop of the blood on a grain of corn and feed the corn to a duck. I fear our medical friends would call this "quackery."

To relieve the pangs of childbirth put the hat of the child's father under the bed. One of my correspondents writes that the trouble with this remedy up on his creek is that they can't always feel sure of the hat.

A very generally used remedy for the measles is a tea made from dried sheep dung. I have been struck with the prevalence of the faith in this

remedy, and its use is by no means confined to the uneducated. The question has suggested itself, upon what is this faith based? Why, after so many years of trial of this and other home remedies, do the people still believe in them unless experience of generations has shown that they do have some virtue, and do relieve the ills for which they are used? And if this is true, would it not be the part of wisdom for the doctors to thoroughly test these old remedies before casting them aside as vain superstitions? But, perhaps, our medical friends are more alert and progressive than I suspect, and have tested and are even using some of these old remedies. If so, I hope they will tell us, and tell us especially what has been their experience with this remedy for measles.

In the 6th chapter of the book of Tobit we read:—

1. "And as they went on their journey they came in the evening to the river Tigris and they lodged there.
2. "And when the young man went down to wash himself, a fish leaped out of the river and would have devoured him.
3. "Then the angel said unto him, 'Take the fish.' And the young man laid hold of the fish and drew it to land.
4. "To whom the Angel said, 'Open the fish, and take the heart and the liver and the gall, and put them up safely.'
5. "So the young man did as the angel commanded him; . . .
6. "Then the young man said to the Angel, 'Brother Azarias, to what use is the heart, and the liver, and the gall of the fish?'
7. "And he said unto him . . .
8. "'As for the gall, it is good to anoint a man that hath whiteness in his eyes, and he shall be healed.'"

And in the 11th chapter we read how Tobit was cured of his blindness by use of the fish gall, notwithstanding he had been to the physicians and they "helped him not." Can this old story from the Apocrypha be the foundation for a very general belief still prevalent that fish bladder rubbed on sore or weak eyes cures and strengthens them?

It would indeed be interesting to trace these old beliefs to their sources, but such an attempt would require much time and research, and I fear would prove vain in many instances, as the sources of many are undoubtedly lost in the haze of antiquity; and the strongest proof of their antiquity is that they have outlived the knowledge of the causes that gave rise to them.

*Haywood Parker.*